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TAGS: [NATO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AL](#)
SUBJECT: ALBANIANS WILL WELCOME NATO MEMBERSHIP ... ALTHOUGH
REALITIES ARE BEGINNING TO SINK IN

Ref: TIRANA 102

Summary

1. (U) NATO membership is strongly supported by the Albanian public and officialdom -- over ninety percent favor membership, according to the media and GOA officials. There are numerous reasons for this. Emerging from years of isolation, Albanians want to feel and be recognized as the Europeans they really are. NATO membership would certainly do that. Also, Albanians want to be able to travel like Europeans and enjoy a higher quality of life. They see NATO membership as a way of moving toward these goals by focusing on reforms, by attracting more foreign investment, and by moving a step closer to membership in the EU.

2. (U) However, there seems to be a growing sentiment that the GOA is neglecting domestic policies and concentrating too much on courting foreign institutions. While electricity blackouts and water shortages have ceased for the time being, they are still fresh in the minds of citizens who realize that a whim of nature could bring the darkness back quickly. Moreover, as prices of daily commodities rise in response to increased energy costs, some are beginning to question the government's priorities. Although the whole spectrum of political parties and the public remain steadfastly committed to NATO, a few are gradually raising the question: is foreign recognition worth doubling the price of bread?
End Summary.

High Public Support For NATO?

3. (U) According to the GOA, popular support for NATO has never been higher among Albanians, with some GOA estimates as high as 95% of the population. As the Bucharest Summit approaches, Post has attempted to identify what Albanians expect will come from a NATO invitation that generates this kind of enthusiasm. Furthermore, Post has taken steps to understand what the GOA is anticipating after the Bucharest Summit assuming an invitation is extended.

4. (SBU) We should clarify that GOA estimates of high popular support is based on "gut-feel" - there has never been a scientific poll of any kind asking the general public for its opinion on NATO membership. Also, while Embassy personnel have tried to explain obligations of NATO membership to GOA interlocutors, the message has not sunk in and certainly has not been passed on to the public.

Economic Advantages

5. (U) The GOA cites mostly economic reasons why being a member of NATO is a positive step for the future of Albania. Foreign investment would increase due to investors' greater confidence in Albania's political stability, rule of law, and fight against corruption. History reflects this with other countries' membership

in NATO, such as Romania and Bulgaria. However, all the recent NATO inductees also became members of the European Union shortly after NATO accession, something that will likely not happen to Albania for many years.

¶16. (U) Accounts from new member states also indicate that before new investment began to boost the economy, which took several years in some cases, the states experienced a reduction of military assistance from the Allies, causing an initial belt-tightening and reduction in economic well-being. Albanians are already grumbling loudly about soaring food prices. Producers warn that bread prices could double by the end of this year from 2006 prices. Other food items have also increased by 25 - 100 percent during the same period. An electricity rate hike is planned for later this spring, which, along with spiraling fuel costs, will add to the consumers' economic burden (reftel). Nevertheless, many Albanians see NATO as a driver, not an inhibitor, for the GOA to remain committed to reforms, which, in the longer term, will mean more prosperity for all.

"The Club"

¶17. (U) The real reason for NATO enthusiasm probably has more to do with national pride and prestige. Albania was an isolated pariah fr/1T7(kPing them relief - Europeans began to view Albania as the cradle of organized crime, drugs, and trafficking, and kept their doors closed.

¶18. (U) NATO membership, therefore, is important to Albanians because it tells them that Europeans are beginning to see them more as

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partners and members of the family. When poloff recently visited a remote village, he was warmly received because the villagers see the U.S. as a country that respects them as people and wants to help them achieve status in Europe. While they knew little of NATO, they understood that NATO would bring them closer to becoming real Europeans. FM Basha told USG interlocutors on a recent Washington visit that Albania owes many of its successes in fighting corruption, organized crime, trafficking, and a growing economy to its foreign policy, which has made Albanians feel more respected than ever.

Travel

¶19. (U) An important perceived advantage of being in "The Club" is the ability to travel freely. Unrestricted travel is a dream for many Albanians, who consider themselves still to be in a kind of jail from which they cannot escape without someone's permission. Many we have talked to seem to think that NATO membership will suddenly give them freer travel access throughout the world, possibly confusing NATO membership with EU membership - and individual national visa regimes.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) While politicians continue to boast about high public support for NATO, there are clearly some holes in the dike. As mentioned in reftel, Albanians are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with domestic policies that they blame for higher prices and an electricity crisis that for the moment is under control, but that could flare up again anytime. If economic prosperity immediately following a NATO invitation does not happen, as may well be the case, the public could become disillusioned with the GOA quickly. Furthermore, it is a general consensus among many Albanians that NATO brings security and stability to Albania, furthering a vision of democracy and freedom. However, few seem to comprehend that there is a line to toe after the Bucharest Summit. NATO membership, and essentially the stability it can eventually provide for Albania, is not achieved by simply accepting an invitation, but by continuing reforms and integration of NATO security standards.

